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Egypt: Status of the Coptic Community

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An Intelligence Assessment

State Dept. review completed

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May 1983*

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An Intelligence Assessment

This assessment was prepared by [redacted]
[redacted] the Office of Near East-South Asia Analysis with
a contribution from [redacted] the Office of
Central Reference. Comments and queries are
welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, Arab-
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**Egypt: Status of the
Coptic Community**

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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 15 April 1983
was used in this report.*

The status of Egypt's Coptic Christian minority of some 3-4 million has for centuries been a sensitive and often troublesome issue for the country's Muslim rulers. One of the primary concerns of President Mubarak has been to avoid any personal decision that would trigger sectarian violence and perhaps destabilize his regime. The tight security measures in effect since Sadat's assassination in October 1981 have so far contained the activities of both Muslim and Coptic extremists. They also have prevented sectarian clashes such as those that occurred during the last years of the Sadat regime.

Mubarak has followed generally balanced sectarian policies that in some respects have proven beneficial to Copts. His moderate political and religious views have raised hopes among Copts that the government is sensitive to their concerns. Mubarak's willingness to address Coptic complaints about discrimination and harassment by Muslim fundamentalists, however, will depend largely on whether he believes the complaints are fair and whether the solutions are acceptable to the moderate Muslim majority.

The two most sensitive and controversial issues for Copts—Sadat's decree in 1981 revoking state recognition of the head of the Coptic Church, Pope Shinuda, and efforts to broaden the application of Islamic law—are unlikely to be resolved quickly. Mubarak will probably delay any final decision on Pope Shinuda's status until the Copts have exhausted the judicial appeal process. Egypt's parliament is studying the possibility of expanding the use of Islamic law and is scheduled to make its recommendations later this year. A favorable ruling would alarm the Coptic community as well as many moderate Muslims, and Mubarak is likely to minimize or dilute any expanded usage of Islamic law.

Whatever the outcome of these issues, we believe that incidents of sectarian violence are almost inevitable in the years ahead. Many of the underlying causes of Muslim-Coptic tensions still exist. The appeal of religion as a solution to social problems remains strong among Egyptian youth. Copts and Muslims also continue to harbor suspicions about each other's political intentions.

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Isolated incidents of religious strife would be embarrassing for Mubarak but would not necessarily weaken his position. There is a danger, however, that even a limited communal incident in Cairo could escalate and lead to large-scale riots over other issues such as economic grievances. Prolonged unrest of this nature would be difficult to control and could threaten the stability of the regime.

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**Egypt: Status of the
Coptic Community**

The status of Egypt's Coptic Christian community is a complex and potentially destabilizing issue for the Mubarak government. During the last years of the Sadat regime, the normally good relations between Egypt's Muslims and Copts deteriorated significantly. In the summer of 1981 the most serious sectarian violence since the 1940s broke out in the working-class Cairo district of Zawia al-Hamra. Over 100 Egyptian Muslims and Copts were killed or seriously wounded in riots that stemmed from a feud over the purchase of a tract of land by a Copt on which Muslims wanted to construct a mosque.

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In September, one month before his assassination by Muslim extremists, President Sadat moved against some 1,500 Muslim and Coptic critics of the regime, charging them with inciting sectarian violence. Church-state relations reached a low point as Sadat arrested some 120 Coptic clergy and laymen. He also revoked government recognition of Pope Shinuda as head of the Coptic Church, charged he politicized the papal office, confined him to a monastery in Wadi al-Natrun outside Cairo, and appointed a committee of five politically conservative bishops to discharge Shinuda's duties.

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Heightened tensions between Muslims and Copts resulted from several factors, especially the post-1967 religious revival that spurred the growth of Islamic fundamentalism and a corresponding Coptic militancy. Pope Shinuda, elected in 1971, provided militants with a charismatic, tough-minded leader who was willing to risk confrontation with the Sadat regime in order to champion Coptic rights.

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In the early 1970s Copts became increasingly worried about Sadat's encouragement of Islamic fundamentalism as a counter to the threat he perceived from the leftist opposition. the US Embassy in Cairo note that, by the late 1970s, Copts had begun to doubt Sadat's willingness or ability to protect them from harassment by Islamic fundamentalist groups. The most insecure Copts also came to

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believe Sadat would endorse official adoption of Islamic law, which Copts believed would turn Egypt into a Khomeini-style theocracy with religious minorities reduced to second-class status.

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Muslim-Coptic tensions also stemmed from the frustration evoked by the rapid changes in the 1970s. Sadat's domestic and foreign policies, which turned Egypt toward the West, placed tremendous stress on Egyptian society. For example, his "open door" economic policy appeared to erode traditional cultural values and created a larger gap between rich and poor than had existed in the Nasir years. The peace treaty with Israel divided Egypt from the rest of the Arabs and brought no quick resolution to the Palestinian problem. Many Egyptian Islamic fundamentalists saw Western influence in these developments and alleged Coptic complicity.

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US Embassy reporting has shown that Mubarak is sensitive to Coptic questions when formulating policies to maintain domestic political stability and a positive image abroad. For example, the status of Pope Shinuda has had special review in the National Defense Council, and Mubarak is briefed regularly on Coptic issues by the Minister of Interior and the Prime Minister. If he moves too quickly on Coptic issues such as rehabilitating Pope Shinuda, he risks angering the Islamic right and a possible outbreak of sectarian violence. Indefinitely delaying such decisions, however, risks playing into the hands of Coptic militants who are willing to embarrass the regime abroad by turning the status of the Pope and of Copts in general into a human rights issue.

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Coptic Grievances

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There are numerous charges and countercharges about the existence of official discrimination against Copts in Egypt. We have not substantiated many

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Egyptian youth participating in Muslim-Coptic clashes in the Zawia al-Hamra district of Cairo during June 1981 [redacted]

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Coptic complaints, but in our judgment a degree of de facto discrimination does exist. We also believe that some Coptic allegations are exaggerated. [redacted]

Coptic grievances include both those that concern the church as a religious institution and those that Copts claim affect their civil rights. Copts assert that the government has purposely undercounted their numbers in order to limit access to such things as government jobs and scholarships. They argue that census officials frequently record Christian names as Muslim. According to the 1976 census, Copts comprise 6.31 percent of the population or presently about 2.75 million. We believe that there are at least 3 million Copts in Egypt, and some [redacted] suggest the actual figure could be as high as 10 percent or 4.5 million. Coptic activists insist it is even higher. Emigrant groups in North America claim that Copts comprise at least 20 percent of the population, but we believe this figure is inflated. [redacted]

Coptic leaders complain that they must obtain permission from the government to build or repair churches while Muslims do not suffer from similar restrictions on mosques. They also argue that they often have difficulty convincing local administrators of the necessity for a new church, one of 10 conditions that must be met to receive a government building

permit. As a result, church leaders claim, they must build temporary "illegal" churches that have in the recent past been the special targets of arson and bombings by Islamic extremists. A recent US Embassy report quoted one bishop in Upper Egypt as stating that because of permit difficulties, only six of 14 churches built in recent years were legal. [redacted]

Religious endowments are a major source of income for the Coptic Church, and [redacted] church leaders have tried to recover about 200 endowments confiscated in 1968 by the Ministry of Religious Endowments. Copts argue that President Nasir had acknowledged that Coptic religious endowments were under the control of a board appointed by the Pope. They charge that the Ministry of Religious Endowments, which is responsible for Muslim funds, justified the confiscation on the grounds that some beneficiaries might be Muslims. [redacted] the Coptic leadership has found this particularly unjust and continues to lobby the government, so far unsuccessfully, for their restitution. [redacted]

The Copts are particularly sensitive about discrimination in education. They place great value on educational excellence and believe that the state educational system is biased against them. For example, [redacted]

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A Profile of Egypt's Copts

Coptic Christians are the only significant religious minority in Egypt, representing some 6 to 10 percent of the total population and over 95 percent of Egypt's Christians. The word Copt is an Arabized Greek word meaning "inhabitant of Egypt." The Copts claim descent from Egyptians converted by the Apostle Mark. They withstood Byzantine persecution for being monophysites (believing that the divine and human natures of Christ are one, indivisible and indistinguishable) and resisted conversion to Islam after the Arab conquest in the seventh century. Their long history has given Copts a deep awareness of their Egyptian heritage, and they are fervent nationalists.

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The Coptic Church in Egypt has maintained a separate identity from the theologically similar Eastern Orthodox Church, largely because the isolation of the Copts under Islamic rulers encouraged an independent clergy and papacy. The Coptic Church today belongs to the World Council of Churches, maintains a dialogue with the Vatican, and retains spiritual leadership over its sister church in Ethiopia.

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Today's Copts are ethnically and linguistically indistinguishable from Egypt's Muslim majority. During the 19th century Egyptian rulers gave Copts equal citizenship with Muslims, freeing them from the

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Copts did disproportionately well in examinations for government scholarships abroad before the addition in 1973 of an interview. Copts now claim they receive only 2 percent of such scholarships because the interview establishes their religious identity. Additionally,

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Coptic student complaints that Muslim professors impede their progress and fail to give them recognition even when they are academically superior to Muslims competing for school honors and good jobs.

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Copts also contend, apparently with justification, that they are discriminated against when seeking government-controlled jobs and senior civil service positions.

restrictions of official minority status under Islamic law. During this period the government abolished such discriminatory measures as special clothing and a special tax. For the first time Copts became liable for military service and acquired the same electoral rights as Muslims. The Egyptian constitution of 1971 guarantees Christians the same rights as Muslims even though Islam is recognized as the state religion.

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Copts reside throughout Egypt but are a majority in no one area. According to the 1976 Egyptian census, some 60 percent of all Copts live in Upper Egypt, mainly in the governorates of Asyut and al-Minya, where they account for almost one-fifth of the population. Additionally, about 10 percent live in Cairo and another 6 percent in Alexandria, according to Egyptian Government data (see map).

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Copts are represented in every social and economic class. For example, Copts form a majority of Cairo's rubbish collectors. They also are particularly numerous as businessmen and in the professions where they comprise a high proportion of lawyers, engineers, doctors, and pharmacists. Copts, however, appear underrepresented at high levels of the civil service, the armed forces,

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Even if hired, they claim to have few opportunities for advancement. Many Copts view the few prominent Christians in government service, such as Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Butrus Ghali, as token representatives.

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there appears to be a Coptic quota of less than 10 percent in any one government office.

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Sadat in 1979 received a pamphlet written by Coptic laymen claiming that there were less than 20 Copts among the more than 700 appointed positions in the civil service and in government-run companies.

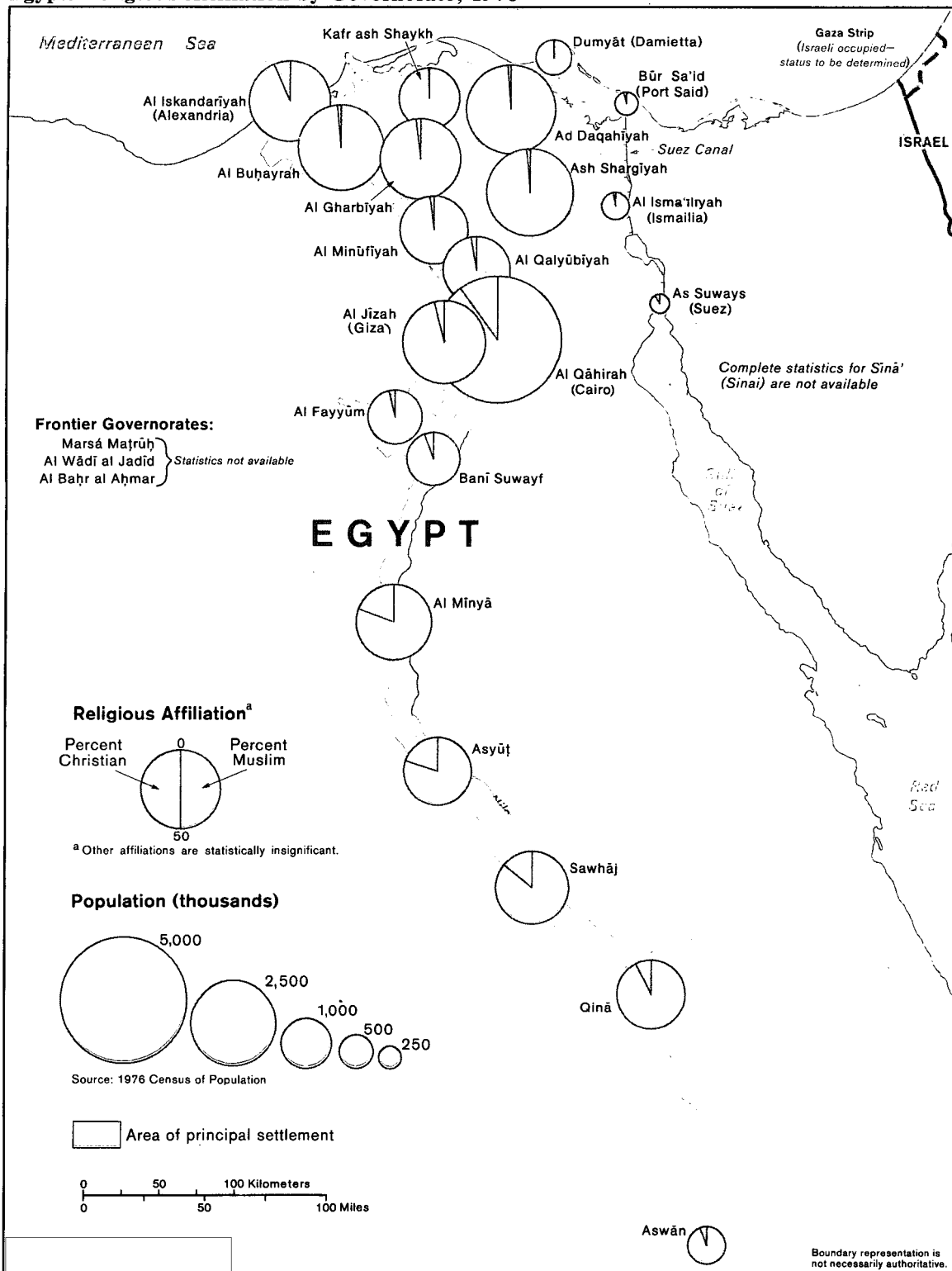
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Egypt: Religious Affiliation by Governorate, 1976



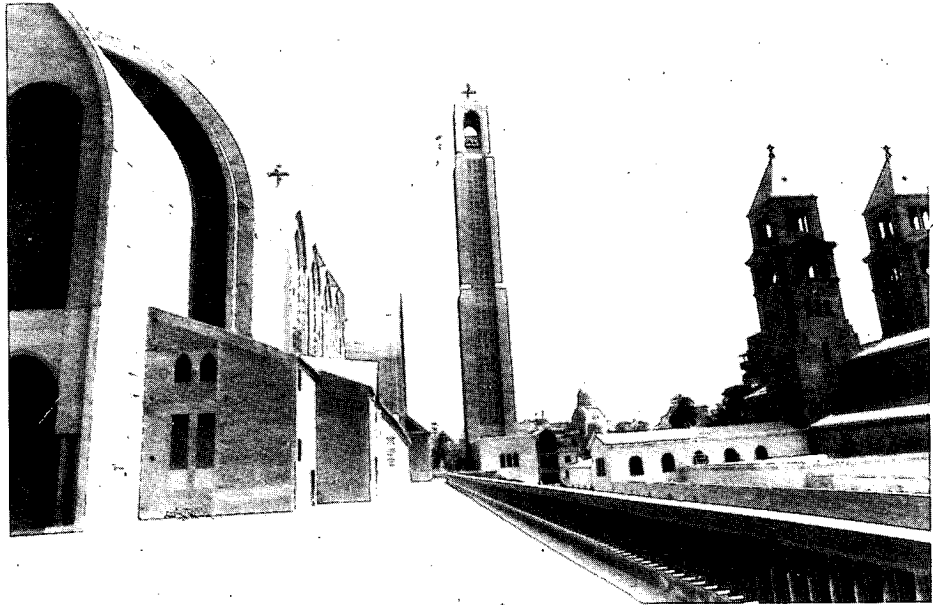
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*St. Mark's Coptic Cathedral in
Cairo* [redacted]

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*St George's Coptic Church and
Monastery in Cairo* [redacted]

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[redacted]

Although Copts are found in the police and armed forces, they complain that they rarely achieve high rank. Copts note further that few Christians are on university faculties and in the diplomatic service, and almost none are appointed governors or hold high positions in government publishing houses.

Over the past 10 years Copts have increasingly claimed that they are victims of legal discrimination as well. The US Embassy has noted Coptic complaints that, in personal status cases involving Christians and Muslims, they often face Muslim judges who apply Islamic law. They further note correctly that cases

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Coptic rubbish collectors built this church in the middle of a Cairo trash dump where they live. The building appears to be one of the many "illegal" Coptic churches in Egypt.

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between two Christians of different sects are subject to Islamic law but fail to point out that this stems in part from the inability of the different Christian sects to agree on common procedures for personal status cases. [redacted]

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Another major source of apprehension among Copts has been Islamic fundamentalist sponsorship of legislation in parliament to apply Islamic law more widely. Although Copts acknowledge that they were able to lobby successfully against such legislation in 1977, the Islamic right engineered the passage of an amendment to the constitution in 1980 that identifies Islamic law as *the* major rather than *a* major source of legislation in Egypt. Copts are strongly concerned that a parliamentary commission report due to be released in late 1983 will recommend the broader implementation of Islamic law in Egypt. [redacted]

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If Islamic law replaces the French-based legal system, Copts fear a return to the second-class status of the 19th century. Islamic law categorizes Copts as "People of the Book," guaranteeing them certain rights but at the same time relegating them to subordinate status. If Islamic law were fully implemented, Copts would have to pay a special tax not levied on Muslims, could not serve in the armed forces, apparently would not be able to bear witness against a Muslim in criminal cases, and probably would not be able to act in a supervisory position over Muslims. [redacted]

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The Copts' sensitivity to legal discrimination is closely linked to the growing strength of the Islamic right and the Islamic coloration they believed Sadat gave his regime. [redacted] Copts blamed the growth in sectarian strife on the Sadat government's initial toleration of Islamic fundamentalist groups. Copts charged that Sadat largely ignored Islamic fundamentalist harassment of Christian students in the universities, the burning and bombings of Coptic churches, and violent personal attacks on Copts. [redacted]

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The US Embassy reports that Copts believe officials in the Ministry of Interior and many in the governorates share the Islamic fundamentalists' anti-Christian sentiments. They cite the recently retired governor of Asyut in Upper Egypt as particularly prejudiced

against Copts. They have also complained of police brutality during confrontations between Copts and Muslims [redacted]

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Muslim Countercharges

[redacted] Muslims generally see Copts as secretive and clannish, a trend they say has increased in recent years. Muslims point out that Copts prohibit intermarriage and now claim that many Copts do not allow their children to talk or play with Muslim youngsters. [redacted]

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[redacted] Muslims believe Copts are paranoid about discrimination both in the workplace and in educational institutions. [redacted]

Muslim attitudes are revealed in an old Egyptian joke about an aspiring radio announcer who, when asked why he had not gotten the job, stuttered "because I am a C-C-C-Copt." [redacted]

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If Muslims cannot appreciate Coptic perceptions of discrimination, many also fail to understand why Copts are so worried about the implementation of Islamic law. An Egyptian newspaper editor, who is a Muslim exposed to Western education, told a US Embassy officer that it was ridiculous for Copts to fear Islamic law since it would free them from military service and from certain burdensome taxes paid by Muslims. Many moderate Muslims also believe that Pope Shinuda politicized his office, and they agreed with Sadat's moves against him in September 1981. [redacted]

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In recent years Islamic fundamentalists have increased the level of anti-Coptic rhetoric in their pamphlets and newspapers. Many of their allegations are wildly exaggerated. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood's periodical *al-Dawa* claimed in May 1980 that a primary Coptic goal was to expel Muslims from Egypt. It charged that the Copts were involved in a conspiracy to establish a minority dictatorship when they made demands for more positions in the civil service and the cabinet. The periodical cited Shinuda's ban on birth control for Copts as proof of a plot to increase their numbers and take over the country. [redacted]

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25X1 Islamic extremist groups have charged in pamphlets that the Copts are agents of Western imperialism and such foreign powers as Israel and the United States.

[redacted] they accuse the Copts of seeking to establish an independent state around Asyut and al-Minya. Muslim extremists also have alleged that Copts are receiving financial assistance and arms from foreign powers, especially the United States, which purportedly backs Coptic aspirations and hopes to use them as a "fifth column" inside Egypt. [redacted]

Coptic Activists and Militants

25X1 The most vocal advocates of Coptic rights have been members of the church hierarchy, particularly Pope Shinuda, and Coptic emigrant groups. Additionally, there are numerous Coptic religious and social groups that are comparable to Islamic societies in Egyptian universities.¹ Reports from the US Embassy suggest the possible existence of secret Coptic militant groups similar to those formed by Islamic extremists. [redacted]

25X1 The election of Pope Shinuda in 1971 gave political activists in the church a dynamic, well-educated, and tough-minded leader around whom they could rally. They believed the Pope should not only be a religious leader but also the champion of Coptic civil rights. According to the US Embassy, political activists in the church appear to be a minority but have had a disproportionate influence on church policy because the Pope shares their views. Many of the 120 Coptic clergy and laymen arrested in September 1981, and subsequently released by Mubarak, were from the core leadership of the politicized faction in the church. [redacted]

25X1 Little information is available about today's militant Coptic organizations. In the early 1950s, partly in response to the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, a radical movement arose known as the Coptic Nation that called for a separate state, had its own flag and uniform, urged the revival of the Coptic language, and demanded its own radio station. Outlawed by [redacted]

Nasir in the mid-1950s, Egyptian authorities estimated its membership to be about 90,000, [redacted]

[redacted] there are no radical Coptic groups today that can claim as large a membership as the Coptic Nation, nor do any known Coptic groups presently pose a serious threat to the regime. The US Embassy, however, has noted the apparent existence of at least three radical Coptic groups including Jund al-Masih (Soldiers of the Messiah), the al-Karma Society, and the Sons of the Gospel Society. Jund al-Masih is rumored to be a paramilitary organization that is strong in Upper Egypt. The al-Karma and the Sons of the Gospel Societies were both banned by Sadat in September 1981, and several of their members were imprisoned. According to the US Embassy, both these organizations are still illegal, but there are indications that they may be reorganizing underground. The al-Karma Society is active principally in Cairo but also has branches in Upper Egypt. It is ostensibly a charitable group. The Sons of the Gospel Society is a group of clergy and laymen active in the universities in Upper Egypt, especially in Asyut, Sohag, and Qena. [redacted]

The Coptic Church leadership has denied the existence of paramilitary groups, [redacted]

[redacted] After Sadat's crackdown in September 1981, however, the Egyptian press alleged that Copts were being trained by Christian Phalangists in Lebanon and that arms shipments were being received by Copts in Egypt. [redacted]

Coptic emigrant groups in North America have lobbied aggressively for Coptic interests in Egypt. They have actively petitioned the United States and other foreign governments to cite Egypt as a human rights violator regarding the Copts. Coptic emigrants demonstrated against Sadat during his tours to the United States in 1980 and 1981 and have placed open letters in US newspapers calling for the release of Pope Shinuda. In late 1982 the Coptic groups in North America sent a letter to Mubarak demanding that he release Pope Shinuda and return him to public life,

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that the bishops' committee established by the government be removed from control over church activities, and that the constitutional amendment passed in 1980 calling for the application of Islamic law not be implemented. [redacted]

The Coptic Church in Egypt has had generally poor relations with Coptic emigrant groups. On several occasions over the past 10 years Pope Shinuda has denounced the activities of those groups for antagonizing the regime and hurting rather than helping Copts in Egypt. [redacted]

[redacted] Shinuda urged Coptic emigrants in the United States not to demonstrate against Mubarak during his visit in January 1983. Technically, Pope Shinuda controls Coptic clergy and laymen overseas. Coptic lobby groups abroad, however, are not recognized as official representatives of the church. The US Embassy recently quoted Bishop Grigorius—a member of the bishops' committee and the leading church theologian—as stating that relations with emigrant groups in North America were presently strained.

Church-State Relations Under Mubarak

Mubarak's personal style and his moderate political orientation have so far been acceptable to most Copts. Mubarak practices his religion discreetly, and he appears to be more of a secularist than was President Sadat. Tight government security measures since the Sadat assassination and the official crackdown on Muslim extremists have eased the confrontational atmosphere evident between Muslims and Copts in 1981. The government also is prosecuting the Sadat conspirators for crimes they committed against Copts, including murders, robberies, and the burning and bombing of churches.² Mubarak, moreover, has released virtually all the Copts arrested by Sadat in 1981 except the Pope. [redacted]

The major point of contention between Mubarak and the Copts centers on the rehabilitation of Pope Shinuda. In early April 1983 an Egyptian court complicated the Shinuda issue by ruling that Sadat's decree

deposing the Pope was constitutional. The court also ruled that the bishops' committee he appointed must be replaced by an interim pontiff until new papal elections can take place. Copts received the ruling with shock and indignation since it was widely believed that the court would overturn Sadat's decree. [redacted] the Pope's lawyers to appeal the ruling to a higher court, but any new decision will take several months. [redacted]

The government has allowed articles by Muslim fundamentalists to be published in new Islamic newspapers owned by the country's secular parties, a move that has generated additional resentment among Copts. The two Coptic newspapers—*al-Watani* and *al-Karazah*—that were banned by Sadat have not been reinstated, nor have Copts been allowed to start new publications. The US Embassy has speculated that Coptic publications will be permitted when the Muslim Brotherhood gains approval to resume publishing its journal. [redacted]

Mubarak's delay in resolving Pope Shinuda's status by allowing the issue to be decided in the courts reflects the government's decision to maintain the appearance of a balanced policy toward Christians and Muslims. Egyptian officials believe that the Pope's return to public life would be provocative while some 280 Islamic extremists are on trial for the Sadat assassination and subsequent insurrection in Asyut. Additionally, the Mubarak government has received mixed signals from the Coptic community over the status of Pope Shinuda. Several conservative and influential laymen have suggested that the Pope's continued detention is acceptable and indicated their concern that his release might renew Muslim-Coptic hostilities. Nevertheless, the Coptic bishops have made clear that they view Pope Shinuda as their ecclesiastical leader and do not recognize the government's right to interfere in internal church affairs.

Outlook

Despite the current calm, outbursts of renewed sectarian strife probably will recur. Many of the underlying causes of Muslim-Coptic tensions are still present.

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The appeal of religion as a solution to personal and social problems remains strong among Muslim and Coptic youth. Copts and Muslims, moreover, are highly suspicious of each other's political intentions. If Mubarak is forced to impose austerity measures in response to financial problems caused by falling world oil prices, economic and social pressures in Egypt are likely to worsen. As in 1981, a minor incident could spark communal riots in the overcrowded, lower class neighborhoods of Cairo or in Upper Egypt, where sectarian tensions run deep.

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One of Mubarak's primary concerns will be to avoid any decision that might trigger sectarian violence and destabilize his regime. Normalization of the government's relationship with the Coptic community will remain subordinate to Mubarak's attempts to project an evenhanded approach toward the sectarian issue. Mubarak will try to delay any final decision about Pope Shinuda as long as he believes that his rehabilitation could jeopardize confessional peace or reduce moderate Muslim support for his efforts to eliminate threats from Muslim extremists. Mubarak probably calculates, moreover, that the Copts pose less of a security threat to his regime than the Islamic radicals.

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Appendix A

The Copts Under Nasir and Sadat

Following the military coup of 1952 Nasir began exerting increased government influence and control over both Muslim and Coptic institutions. In 1954 he set a precedent for government intervention in church affairs. At the request of both the Coptic Higher Community Council and the Holy Synod of Bishops, Nasir issued a government decree unseating the Coptic Pope following an internal church scandal. In 1959 another presidential decree established rules for the papal election, and in 1962 Nasir abolished the lay council, leaving the Pope as the only officially recognized representative of the Coptic Church. After 1968 Nasir placed some 200 charities endowed by Christians under the supervision of the Ministry of Religious Endowments. [REDACTED]

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During parliamentary elections in 1957 Nasir began the practice of appointing Christian deputies when no Copts were elected. The tradition of appointing at least one Coptic minister to every cabinet also dates from the Nasir period. Often the Coptic minister served as an intermediary between the government and the Coptic community. [REDACTED]

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Little sectarian strife and few church-state problems were evident under Nasir, in part because of the tight political hold his regime maintained. The Coptic Patriarch, Kyrillos VI (1959-71), avoided involvement in national politics and formally supported government policy. Nasir's policies toward the Muslim and Coptic communities generally were evenhanded. He suppressed the Muslim Brotherhood by the mid-1950s but also outlawed Coptic extremists who called for a separate nation. [REDACTED]

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The impact of Nasir's economic and social policies on the Christian community was mixed. Coptic peasants—the largest group—profited from land reform that split up the large estates of wealthy rural families. The nationalization of large businesses, however, probably hurt Copts more than Muslims. The compression of the private sector in the 1960s also hurt

Copts in nonagricultural pursuits by restricting business activities and career opportunities. Copts, moreover, became increasingly convinced that opportunities for them in the civil service, the public sector, and universities were slim, and thousands emigrated in the late 1950s and 1960s to North America, Australia, and Western Europe. [REDACTED]

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Under President Sadat, Muslim-Coptic tensions and strains in church-state relations increased significantly. Sadat's first major involvement in this problem took place in 1972 when Muslims set fire to a temporary church in al-Khankah, a small town west of Cairo. Pope Shinuda mounted an immediate protest by sending about 100 priests from Cairo to march on the town. Annoyed with the Coptic demonstration, Sadat refused to approve the construction of a church in al-Khankah. Instead, he appointed a parliamentary commission to study Coptic claims that they were unable to acquire permits to build churches in sufficient number to meet the demands of growing congregations. After the commission reported that only 500 of some 1,400 Christian places of worship had received building permits, Sadat promised to allow 50 churches to be built per year and to fund two new churches in the new satellite cities near Cairo. This first encounter with Pope Shinuda, however, led Sadat in 1973 to press for the reestablishment of the Higher Lay Council in the hope that laymen might prove a moderating influence on the Pope and church policy. [REDACTED]

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Sectarian problems emerged again in 1977 when Islamic fundamentalists sponsored draft legislation to apply Islamic law in cases of libel, theft, and apostasy. In response, Pope Shinuda orchestrated a strong protest from the Coptic community in Egypt and Coptic emigrants abroad. The government withdrew the legislation but not before the controversy generated frustration and suspicion among both Copts and Muslims. [REDACTED]

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Thereafter, Muslim-Coptic clashes increased, especially in the Coptic heartland of Asyut and Minya, and Islamic extremists burned and bombed several churches. Some deaths and several serious injuries occurred. Islamic fundamentalist rhetoric was inflammatory and questioned Coptic loyalty to Egypt. In part, Islamic fundamentalist groups appeared to be venting their frustrations on the Copts over events such as the peace treaty with Israel in 1979, Sadat's offer of refuge to the Shah of Iran, and the Israeli bombing of the Iraqi nuclear facility in 1981. []

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Copts were understandably fearful over the upsurge in Muslim-Coptic tensions. Church leaders, however, seemed to exploit and sensationalize even the most inconsequential incidents. Pope Shinuda reportedly warned Copts that they might have to arm to protect themselves. In early 1980 the church hierarchy went into retreat as a protest against communal violence and later accused the Ministry of Interior of ignoring attacks on Copts. The demonstration of Coptic emigrants during Sadat's US tour in April 1980 angered him, and shortly after his return he launched a scathing public attack on the leadership of the Coptic Church for becoming involved in politics. Thereafter, Sadat ignored Pope Shinuda and began to cultivate Coptic laymen considered loyal to the regime. Among these were Talaat Yunaan, a journalist, who was given responsibility for Coptic affairs in the National Democratic Party, and Albert Barsum Salama, who handled Coptic issues as Minister of State for Emigration and Egyptians Abroad Affairs. []

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Church-state and Muslim-Coptic relations continued on a downward slide, and sectarian clashes peaked in June 1981 when violence broke out in the working-class Cairo district of Zawia al-Hamra, resulting in well over 100 dead and wounded. Coptic emigrants again demonstrated against Sadat when he visited the United States in August. The low point was reached in September 1981 with Sadat's crackdown on secular and religious opponents. []

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Before the deterioration of Sadat's relations with the Coptic community, he had expressed sympathy for Coptic Christians in many of his speeches, and his economic policies benefited Copts in general. Sadat's attempts to liberalize Egypt's economy pleased many businessmen and shopkeepers who comprised an influential sector of the Coptic community. His conservative, pro-Western policies coincided with those of most Coptic clergy and laymen. Additionally, Sadat's peace with Israel and the break with the Arab states were generally well received among Copts. []

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Sadat was also responsible for giving Copts greater prominence in government, although many Copts continued to claim such actions were only tokenism. In the parliamentary elections of 1979 Sadat assured the election of several Copts, and he appointed 10 Christian deputies to parliament. He also increased the number of Copts in the cabinet. Butrus Ghali, the current Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, is a Copt appointed by Sadat who holds an important and sensitive post. General Fuad Aziz Ghali, a hero of the 1973 war, had an unprecedented career for a Copt. He held high-level administrative positions in the armed forces and was appointed a provincial governor in 1980. []

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